

Victims say scars of sexual abuse last a lifetime

They hope speaking out will help children

By TODD MCADAM
Press & Sun-Bulletin

Mike Benker had his suspicions about the priest, but he didn't act until the priest demanded in 1985 to fondle a friend.

What followed for Benker and his friends was more than

15 years of silence and guilt. After the Rochester diocese admitted it removed the Rev. Albert Cason from his ministry for molesting children, the victims started to come forward.

They still talk about it among themselves over a beer or at some reunion or other, even

though their parents and neighbors would just as soon put it all behind them. Sometime. But Benker, who said he was never abused, and abuse victims say it's time someone stood up for the children they were.

Thousands of people across the Southern Tier were abused as children, not all by

priests. A 1996 survey by a sociologist at the University of New Hampshire suggests that 27 percent of all women and 17 percent of all men were sexually abused as children. If those numbers are accurate, that means 44,000 people in Broome County were molested — nearly the population of Binghamton.

"I denied it for so many

years. He was the one person you're taught to trust," said Dave, who asked that his last name not be used. He was one of Cason's first targets in the early 1970s. He knows others, most of them younger, right up to the point when Cason was removed from St. Patrick's Church in Owego in 1985.

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Benker, who lives in Owego, reported the incident involving his friend and police investigated several claims of abuse against Cason, but say the families in 1985 declined to press charges. The Rochester diocese removed Cason from all ministries, never to be a priest again.

Dave, now 40, has no particular shame about what happened, but it took him years to put the abuse behind him, and he'd rather not have to go through it again.

Alfred Ketchum, a Town of Union resident, knows exactly how he feels. For 40 years, he kept the secret he thought nobody would believe — that an adult relative had abused him. In the 10 years since he finally admitted to himself what happened, he has told his counselor, his wife, his pastor and the media. In that order.

"They explained to me that I was a victim, but I still have a hard time understanding it," said Ketchum, now a 65-year-old retired IBM engineer. "I knew this man. I had a great affection for him."

Both Dave and Ketchum describe the same feelings over the years in dealing with the abuse: denial, self-doubt, guilt, anger.

How it begins

Both Cason and Ketchum's abuser — who died decades ago — operated in a similar manner, their victims said. The initial contact was incidental, negligible, even benign. "It was a tickling thing," Dave said, perhaps a tickle fight while camping. "You wouldn't even think about it."

Eventually, Cason would start to draw letters on the children's stomachs and challenge them to guess what he was writing. Ketchum would play board games with his abuser. The touching, at first, was barely noticeable.

"Then it escalated, little by little," Ketchum said. "Looking back now, I was manipulated."

Step by step, both abusers worked their system. Ketchum's abuser was a relative and lived nearby. It was perfectly logical the two should have frequent contact.

Dave's abuser, Cason, would arrange reasons for children to be sent to his room in the rectory, perhaps for a minor chore. Gradually, the children would grow accustomed to being there. The room featured a speaker linked to the church so they could hear Cason say Mass. They could play games, and the booze wasn't locked up.

"He used to let us smoke his pipes," Dave recalled. "He had a Turkish water pipe."

Where Ketchum's experience differs from Dave's is when the abuse became most blatant.

Dave, who was about 13 at the time, was called to Cason's room. "I was supposed to be helping him do something. Other boys were supposed to be there," he said. Cason closed the door and held him down. Before a secretary rang to tell Cason he had a call and Dave was able to

get away, Cason's hand was firmly down Dave's pants.

"This was blatant," Dave said. "I was up, gone and out of there." Dave never went back, nor did he tell anyone.

"I didn't even tell my mom," he said. "I thought I did something." So did Ketchum. But he did go back, to be abused for more than a year. "You don't have rational thoughts about it," he said. His abuser was a relative. Who would believe him if he told them what happened? There were no marks, no bruises.

"And let's face it, it's a pleasurable thing," Ketchum said. He was, after all, an adolescent boy with all the normal adolescent drives. "They take advantage of that."

Lasting scars

And that's what led to the scars beyond any beating an abuser may give a child. Ketchum felt betrayed by a relative he looked up to, left confused about his sexuality and his self-worth, guilty over being part of an act he knew was wrong. "I felt shame and anger that I wasn't normal," he said.

But he was. He was captain of his high school football team, even if he says he was only a middling half-back. And he ran the quarter-mile in track, again not well. He dated and eventually married his high school sweetheart.

And in the back of his mind was that guilt.

Research shows that the more violent or forceful the abuse, the less guilt-related trauma a child suffers, said Ronce Brimberg-Clark, supervisor of the Family and Children's Society sexual abuse treatment program. And if a child should actually find himself aroused, that compounds the anguish. Ketchum's response, both during the abuse and after, was normal.

At 65, Ketchum still tries to take responsibility for his relative's abuse. "I could have run away," he said. But to where? His father, he says, never would have believed him, and it's difficult to avoid one's relatives.

Dave doesn't feel much guilt. Embarrassment, yes, and confusion. His self-image suffered greatly. He won't say anger, but he does say disappointment. And he has difficulty trusting people.

"My wife loved me a lot, but I didn't believe it," Dave said.

Like Ketchum, Dave ran track, and he dated in high school, although he never asked anybody out. His friends, for the most part, were women.

"I just got along with them better," Dave said. "I guess it was a trust thing."

Both men questioned their sexuality, one of the after-effects of

man-on-boy molestation. "We were just starting to think about women," Dave said. "I felt very inadequate about women — like I wasn't good enough."

One significant point does separate Ketchum and Dave: their faith. Ketchum has been a conscientious Church attendant all his life, and stops to pray before he starts to talk about his abuse.

Dave left the Roman Catholic church after the abuse, and has never been back.

In Catholic doctrine, the priest is an intermediary between man and God. So when a priest abuses, the victim could feel abused by God, said Marianne Barone Trent of Oswego, the mother of two sons abused by a priest and an officer with the state chapter of The Linkup, an advocacy group for children who were abused by priests.

Dave, however, did recover his faith.

"I never lost contact with God, but I lost faith for a while," he said. "I'm a firm believer in God, but not in the Catholic Church."

Keeping a secret

Neither Dave nor Ketchum put all his problems together and linked them to the abuse. For decades, Ketchum would seek counseling for depression. For most of those years, as his five children grew up, he never mentioned the abuse to his counselor.

Dave still doesn't link all his problems to the abuse. Like any adult, Dave is complex, and growing more complex as each year adds new experiences to his psyche. Were his problems related to the abuse? Related, but there were other factors. Is the fact he never asked a woman out on a date due to the abuse? Could be, but he was a shy boy long before the abuse ever occurred.

Ketchum, 25 years Dave's senior, used to feel like that, but after 20 years of counseling, he finally couldn't keep it in anymore.

"I waited far too long," he said. "Keeping secrets is devastating." And it's that urge to get rid of the secrets — and to stand up for the children — that inspires both men to talk today.

They look to protect their children and grandchildren, not only from the abusers that may be out there, but from the damage caused by victims' difficulty in forming relationships. Ketchum, in particular, can calmly discuss the abuse and the damage to his psyche, but his voice catches as he talks about his 15 grandchildren.

"I read that victims tend to become abusers. That put a fear in me," he said. "I'm afraid to be alone with my grandkids. I've been kind of withdrawn."

Trust often the first casualty of sex abuse, counselors say

Abuse is a matter of trust. The abuser needs the trust of the victim, the victim's family and the community in order to act.

And it's that trust that is one of the biggest casualties in child sex abuse, said Ronce Brimberg-Clark, who oversees the child sex abuse treatment program for the Family and Children's Society.

"Kids often feel, 'If I can't trust them, who can I trust?'" Brimberg-Clark said.

Her organization counsels both abused children and abusers, so Brimberg-Clark has close knowledge of all the damage molestation can do. Most of it is emotional: lost self-esteem, guilt, depression, eating disorders, substance abuse, anger. And trust.

"It's all very embarrassing. It's confusing," she said.

The difficulty forming trusting relationships means that abuse of one child will ripple through that child's life, to his adult relationships and relationships with future generations.

It's hard to pin down a typical abuser, she added. According to a study of 20,330 adult male sex offenders, more than three-quarters are married, or were divorced. Almost half have a college education. Two-thirds have a job. More than 93 percent have interest in adult sexual encounters. And just as many say they are religious.

She cited four motives for child sex abusers:

- The need to control others.
- The need to express anger.
- Acting out one's own childhood victimization.
- The need to belong and feel intimacy — to temper loneliness.

And child molestation remains one of the most underreported crimes in America. Brimberg-Clark cites a 1996 study by David Finkelhor, a sociologist at the University of New Hampshire and director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center. In that survey of 2,626 people, 27 percent of women and 17 percent of men reported they were abused as children.

— Todd McAdam

Ketchum has it backward. Brimberg-Clark said most victims do not become abusers, although most abusers were victims. But the emotional devastation of that fear lingers, still. Maybe he can end it for other people. "If I can help somebody to get help rather than ignore it — that's my only purpose," he said.

Dave is both affectionate toward his children and confident they would tell him if someone touches

them inappropriately. He wants to make sure the Roman Catholic Church takes the necessary steps to end the climate that allows abuse to continue, and to protect any other child.

"You're never going to stop it, but do something for the kids," Dave said. "If you realize it, people wouldn't have to go through this for all those years."

"I just can't imagine my kids going through this."

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